

Viral Games

Jan Smolders

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Who would want to kill Anita Tavares, the representative of a world-famous AIDS charity based in Stockholm? What was she hiding in the luggage that went missing on her trip to the Dominican Republic? How did French journalist Mathieu “Tim” Timonier come to be with Ms. Tavares on that fateful flight? These are just a few of the intriguing questions that open Jan Smolders’s international thriller, *Viral Games*.

Smolders tackles the questions from several different angles through a complex network of characters who aren’t always what they seem. Readers meet physicians like the powerful Dr. Enrique Cuevas and the mysterious Dr. Erica Sotomayor, who may be dedicated doctors or sidwinding swindlers. Charity leaders like Julio Diaz and Pascual Torres enter the picture alongside businessmen from Jakarta and Santo Domingo. It’s up to Tim to figure out which of these players are honest participants in aid distribution and which are in it for more selfish reasons.

Smolders does an excellent job of portraying the extreme rural poverty in the Dominican Republic and contrasting it with the incredible wealth of many Latin American cities. A world traveler, Smolders is an expert tour guide of downtown Santo Domingo, and names most all of the streets along with their expensive restaurants and hotels. He also takes readers into nearby rural households that have little or no access to clean water, transportation, or medical care. Readers meet HIV/AIDS patients Maria Teresa and Jorge, whose only medical care comes courtesy of the charitable clinics set up in the Dominican bateys. Like countless others, these patients rely heavily on help from charities that send aid workers, medication, and money into the region. It is this influx of riches that Smolders focuses on. What would happen if some unsavory types were to take advantage of the international aid system?

Greed is a powerful motivator, and several characters get involved in the illegal business of diverting expensive antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) needed by HIV/AIDS patients. They seem not only willing to risk the health of the patients who are desperate for ARVs, but even their own health, since illicit drug use and sexual promiscuity are also part of their game. Indeed, some of the dealers find they have also become patients.

Smolders deals out bits and pieces of his characters’ lives through isolated conversations that start to suggest how each is related to the other. As Tim painstakingly puts the pieces together, so does the reader, with the final resolution successfully held off until the very end. The complexity can be overwhelming, as the cast of characters and their associated organizations is vast, but Smolders recaps the action in several places and also offers information in a glossary at the front of the book.

Sleuthing out the clues and connections keeps readers engaged as Smolders carefully reveals the lengths to which his villains will go to reap their financial rewards. Readers who love intricate thrillers based on real-life events will enjoy *Viral Games*.

SHEILA M. TRASK (November 26, 2012)

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